Leading the Way in th

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The Learning Commons is so much more than a room. As you might guess, it is about common places and spaces to experiment, practice, celebrate, learn, work, and play. But much more than that, it is about changing school culture and the way we do business in schools. The school library is now more than the hub of the school, where learners and teachers gravitate to find materials they need and work on projects. As well, the school library is transformed into a vital catalyst for school improvement for staff as well as students. This transformation calls for physical, virtual, and pedagogical changes in addition to a shift in mindset for all players.

We are at the crossroads of an unprecedented opportunity. Demands for school improvement, the call for 21st Century skills instruction, the growth of Professional Learning Communities, and the potential of emerging technologies and Web 2.0 tools to re-engage the passion of teachers and the interest and learners cannot be denied. Alison Zmuda and Violet Harada say it best, "The power of the library media specialist (teacher-librarian) to contribute to the school has never been more vital, more feasible or more exciting than it is today" (2008).

Keeping pace with change is nothing new to school libraries and teacher-librarians. School libraries in Ontario have evolved over the past fifty years, from "book rooms" (built by caring parents and distributed on book carts that travelled from class to class), to designated libraries brimming with books, to the multi-resource facilities we take pride in today. Enriched print, multimedia, virtual collections, and high-tech solutions changed everything about the way we access, circulate, and use information and ideas, but it wasn't new media types or even technologies that were the biggest catalyst for change in Ontario school libraries. It was the 1982 Partners in Action document that dramatically changed teaching and learning in those schools that fully embraced its philosophy. Scheduled classes and information skills taught in isolation were replaced with open timetables and teaching partnerships that designed and delivered inquiry learning experiences in the library. Since then, the global shift in education to programming heavy on classroom and school accountability has caused many educators and educational leaders to overlook the positive effects these programs had on both teaching and learning, school-wide. Many elementary school library programs have shifted back to scheduled classes, book exchange, and isolated computer and information skills instruction. Many secondary school librarians work hard at teaching referencing to ward off plagiarism and frantically try to address the requests of students to find the "stuff" they need to complete classroom teacher-designed assignments. We find ourselves moving backwards on the evolutionary scale. That should ring alarm bells.

We can no longer wait and let "nature" take its course. Students and teachers need our expertise and support now. We have all the "right stuff" to lead schools into sustainable improvement of teaching, learning, and learning to learn. Just as collaboration drove change in the 80's, learning to learn is the pedagogical gold mine that must drive the change today. Successful schools will

e **Learning Commons**

embrace learning literacies and work at developing skills, habits of mind, and responsibilities conducive to learning how to learn in both content knowledge and learning processes. As Michael Fullan says in his brilliant book, *The Six Secrets of Change*, "learning is the work" (2008).
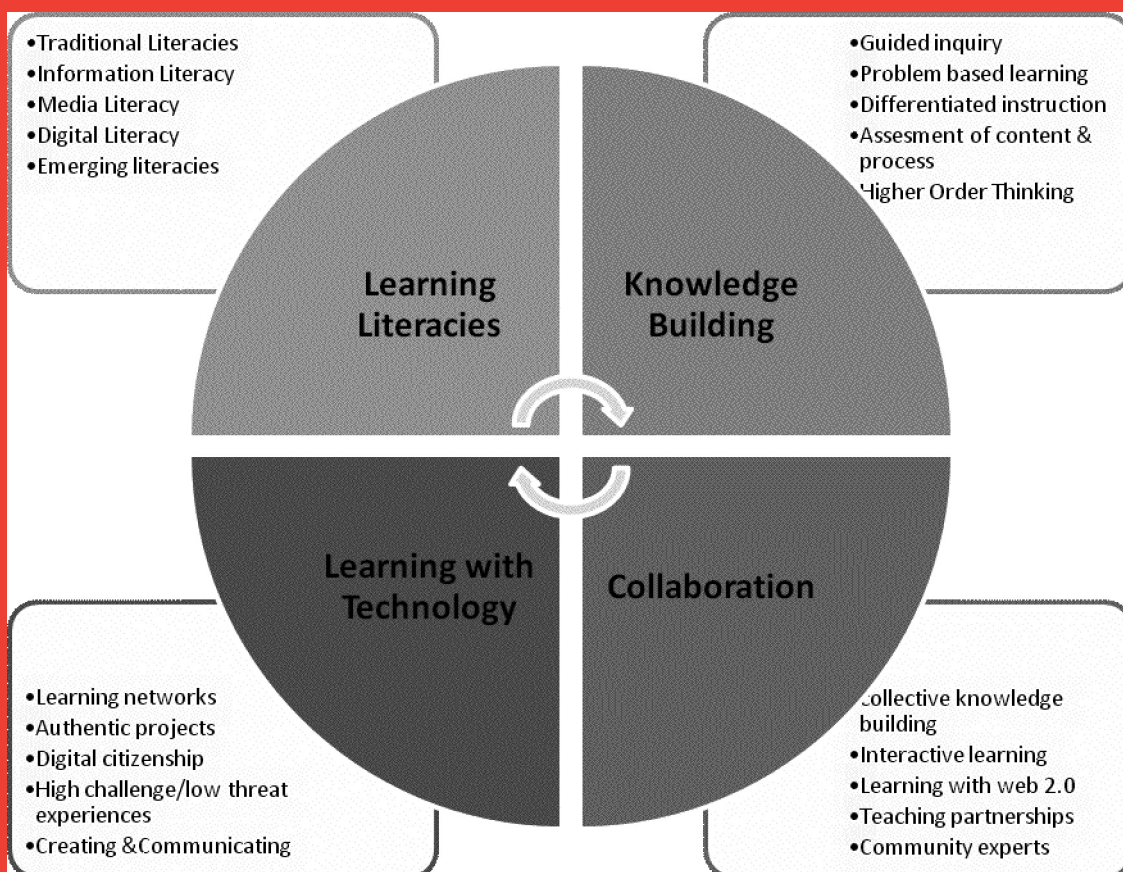
Now our "work" begins. So what is a Learning Commons? Where and how do we start the transformation?

The "work" of the New Learning Commons is to facilitate and lead a new culture of learning that truly addresses the needs of 21st Century learners. Learning to learn is critical to student success in our shifting social, economic, and information landscapes. The Learning Commons provides both physical and virtual spaces that

are rich in resources as well as technologies and support for evolving needs. Through the Learning Commons, interactive, relevant, differentiated instruction is infused to support school initiatives and sustained school improvement. Under the leadership and expertise of the teacher-librarian, various learning partnerships, and Professional Learning Teams, we can develop the centre and showcase for best practice and ongoing school improvement.

This visual provides an overview of desired program as developed in *The New Learning Commons: Where Learners Win*, by Loertscher, Koechlin and Zwaan.

- •Traditional Literacies
- •Information Literacy
- •Media Literacy
- •Digital Literacy
- •Emerging literacies

Learning Literacies

- •Guided inquiry
- •Problem based learning
- •Differentiated instruction
- •Assesment of content & process
- •Higher Order Thinking

Knowledge Building

Learning with Technology

- •Learning networks
- •Authentic projects
- •Digital citizenship
- •High challenge/low threat experiences
- •Creating &Communicating

Collaboration

- •Collective knowledge building
- •Interactive learning
- •Learning with web 2.0
- •Teaching partnerships
- •Community experts

As schools work to build a true Learning Commons, they will soon embrace the many benefits for all.

The New Learning Commons will serve many functions in a school. We are not throwing anything away, but rather adding value to what we already have. Some possibilities are noted in the chart.

Multiple Functions of a Learning Commons

Traditional Library	**Virtual Library**
• Access for students throughout the school day • Teacher-librarian instruction and support • Rich curriculum resources and technologies • Fostering of independent reading • Inquiry learning • Support for differentiated learning • Comfortable areas for work and play • Independent, small group, and class work areas • Displays of student achievement	• Access 24/7/365 • Digital curriculum support resources • Classroom and library project/assignment development • Collaborative work spaces for students and teachers • Learning tools and tutorials/advice • Creation and communication tools and spaces • Connections to community experts • Client-based support
Knowledge Building	**Sustained School Improvement**
• Guided inquiry and problem-based learning • Relevant real world learning assignments • Design for both content and process learning • Continuous assessment and metacognition • Development of multiple literacies • Seamless technology integration • Higher order thinking skills • Collective knowledge building • Teaching and learning efficiency; efficacy	• Demonstration lessons • Embedded professional development • Center for professional learning teams • Evidence-based practice • Collaborative assignment design and implementation • Culture of inquiry • Coordinated implementation and accountability of school-wide initiatives

Now, where and how do we start our transformations?

Guiding Principles

First, you need to develop your vision and the guiding principles for how best to proceed. Start by studying the needs of teachers and learners today. Ask where you and the facility fit in designing and supporting teaching and learning for the 21st Century. Consider how to turn your library "client side" by involving teachers and students in development. Determine how to free up space to ensure the flexibility needed in this common learning lab. Collaborate with staff to ensure that your program provides "just in time" support and skills development. Design a program in the Learning Commons that aligns with school improvement initiatives. Think about how you can involve other learning specialists, classroom teachers, administrators, parents, and students in the development of learning partnerships. Move to the centre of teaching and learning!

Infrastructure

Consider your current staffing, time, and budget. Take inventory of collections, furnishings, technologies, and connectivity. Investigate wireless networks, cloud computing, and best communication systems. If your school has isolated computer labs consult with the staff and students and think creatively to determine how you

might marry your library facility and program to deliver coordinated learning and space for everyone. Develop virtual calendars that will help your school community plan for multiple uses of the Learning Commons. When you have done your homework, write a proposal/action plan. You are ready to begin the transformation. It's time to reinvent!

Physical Spaces

Don't let books and computers get in the way of active learning opportunities. Because the Learning Commons facility will be used for many functions, the space needs to be as flexible as possible. The smaller the library, the more flexibility you will need. If at all possible, relocate shelving so that it is on the walls. Free up as much space as you can by getting more resources into circulation. Consider allowing classes to borrow more books for their classroom collections and rotate them often so the students always have lots of new books to choose from right at their fingertips. Assess how much of your print reference section is still relevant and useful. Be rigorous about weeding. Think about the 24/7 access you can provide to learners by investing in excellent databases and interactive reference resources and the space this will free up in your facility for other functions. Use your new-found space for flexible, multipurpose teaching and working areas for both staff and students.

Put everything you can on rollers and keep furnishings lightweight so they can be moved into many different configurations. Consider laptops or net books housed on rolling carts instead of heavy desktop computers for students. Develop a high tech production centre for creating and publishing projects. Create lots of display areas for book promotion and celebrations of student work. Plan for innovative, active play. Get creative with space!

Virtual Spaces

How can you turn your current school library webpage into a Virtual Learning Commons? Apart from digital resources, consider what else teachers and learners need to operate effectively in your virtual spaces. Work with classroom teachers to post projects, provide pathfinders, link students to research support and presentation tools, and offer tutorials and tips. Students will appreciate this 24/7 support for their learning. Connect to classroom webpages and blogs. Use Web 2.0 tools to facilitate conversations between students, between teachers, and among students and teachers. Develop collaborative workspaces and professional development support. Provide calendars and spaces for administration to follow. Encourage the "work" of the Learning Commons. Make use of all the free tools and workspaces available to build a virtual Learning Commons. See how close you can get to paperless. Create places for students to play with information and ideas and don't be surprised if they start to hang out in your library! Invite students and teachers to help you build your virtual Learning Commons. If they build it, they will use it.

The best thing about the Learning Commons is, that once it starts rolling, teachers, administrators, students, and parents will dive in and help build common places and spaces to learn.

- You will be able to collaborate in the design of learning experiences, teach students what they need when they need it, nurture the reading habit, and concentrate on results in the Learning Commons. The management of the library is no longer a yoke to bear, but a shared responsibility. Under the expert guidance of the teacher-librarian, everyone contributes and collaborates to building an environment rich in resources, technologies, and knowledge-building experiences.
- Teachers become more passionate about teaching, knowing they have all the tools and excellent resources they need at their fingertips.
- Students, with a vested interest, see learning as more relevant and take on more responsibility for their own learning.
- Administrators are able to build effective professional learning teams under the umbrella of the Learning Commons and track results in one space common to all teachers and specialists.
- With this vision, the fluidity and transparency of the Learning Commons has the potential to drive the changes needed to bring schools into the future and sustain improvement.

Plant the seeds today and cultivate a new flowering hybrid, a library/learning lab, a common high think, active learning sphere for the benefit of your school community. Lead the way! **|**

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